

PAEDAGOGIA

2025, Vol. 5, No. 1, 344-359

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.28821917



LAKE FOREST
COLLEGE

Social and Emotional Learning for Students with Disabilities on Individualized Education Plans

Kelsey Akins

Department of Education, Lake Forest College

Abstract

The education system supports students with learning disabilities through Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which primarily address their unique academic needs. While the tailored attention to students' individual academic needs mark significant progress towards a fair and equitable education, the conventional student IEPs and 504 plans do not typically address the social and emotional needs of students with learning disabilities (Elias, 2004). This teacher action research explores how a targeted incorporation of SEL support into students' IEPs affects students' outlook on schooling. Key findings suggest that focused attention on the social and emotional needs of students with learning disabilities as part of their IEPs can provide students the key competences that support their overall academic success and ability to build stronger social connection with peers and the school environment.

Keywords: Integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Student IEPs, Student Attitudes

Introduction

In traditional classroom environments, children are conditioned to strive for standards based academic success throughout their educational careers. Since students, like the entire human population, are neurodiverse, some neurodivergent students are perceived as functioning below grade level due to challenges that highlight differences in their academic performance relative to their neurotypical peers. Neurodivergence refers to students whose brains differ in neurological function from what is regarded as the norm for peers of the same age. Learning disabilities (LDs) are classified as neurodivergent diagnoses, and students with LDs experience different needs when it comes to processing information that directly impact their ability to meet

educational standards. Through individualized education plans (IEPs), educators can support these students with various interventions designed to address the academic performance gap. Ideally, these interventions enable students to meet developmentally appropriate academic expectations relevant to the individual student's growth patterns, thereby closing achievement gaps between the individual and their peers.

During the implementation of IEP interventions, educators must also acknowledge other factors that may hinder students' academic performance and growth. Among these are social and emotional challenges that often go unaddressed. Students with LDs often face cognitive challenges that contribute to feelings of isolation, rejection, and failure. While IEPs and 504 plans represent remarkable progress towards fair and equitable education for all children that was ushered by a series of federal legislations, including the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the education system falls short when it overlooks the negative social and emotional impacts of IEPs and prioritizes narrowly defined academic measures of success. Learning disabilities can hinder a student's academic performance, often necessitating interventions such as being removed from the classroom or receiving support from a resource teacher within the general education classroom. While these interventions address academic needs, they can inadvertently harm students' social and emotional well-being, which is itself a reliable predictor of academic success. These approaches can create an environment where students feel isolated, rejected, or subject to peer pressure, leading to emotional distress (Cavioni et al., 2017). To support optimal outcomes for students with learning disabilities, the education system must balance academic, social, and emotional needs in its approach.

This teacher action research project was inspired by my personal experiences as a student with learning disabilities through which I gained firsthand understanding of the negative impacts that interventions and individualized learning plans can have on neurodivergent students if there is no associated SEL support. As a student who was removed from the classroom for reading intervention, I vividly remember the feelings of isolation, rejection, and peer pressure that followed me throughout my education. While I eventually overcame many academic obstacles in reading and writing, school became associated with negative emotions because I was acutely aware of how different I was from my peers. Being out of the classroom made me feel publicly ashamed, and my classmates were aware that I required additional support outside the classroom for reading. This led to negative feelings about school and a harmful self-perception that lingered even in higher education. Although the IEP was designed to help me reach baseline academic standards, it failed to address my social and emotional well-being. The education system's lack of consideration or support for these aspects of a student's overall success left me to develop my own coping strategies to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Now, as both a former student with learning disabilities and an educator, I recognize the critical importance of emphasizing social and emotional learning for students with similar challenges.

Grounded in personal experience, this study explores how embedding targeted SEL interventions within a student's IEP influences their overall well-being and academic engagement. By situating emotional development alongside academic goals, the research aims to

model a more holistic approach to supporting neurodivergent learners. As such, the study can also be understood as an advocacy and an effort to model for other educators how SEL can be integrated into their existing IEP interventions for neurodivergent students who need unique resources. Yet, it should also be clear that while the focus of this work is on students with IEPs, differentiating instruction and support for students has always been a hallmark of excellence in education, given that each student presents unique cognitive and emotional needs.

The notion of neurotypicality can become a crutch for propping up problematic compliance mechanisms in the name of “academic” standards. Certainly, students should meet appropriate academic standards. However, if achieving such standards comes at the expense of any student’s social and emotional well-being, there is cause for a reconsideration of our approach to learning. This is particularly important because we know that social and emotional learning competencies, including self-confidence and self-efficacy, support academic success (Bransford et al., 2000). Teachers, too, can benefit from such SEL integration by gaining a sense of self-efficacy in their instructional support (Alsalmah, 2023). This dual intersection of my personal experiences and professional commitment to student success with the benefits to both neurodivergent students and the educators who support them deepen my conviction that this is an essential area of exploration for practicing teacher researchers who are committed to creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for all learners.

Literature Review

A growing body of research on the academic growth of students with LDs suggests that educators are gaining clearer understanding of the neurological foundations and educational manifestations of learning differences and of the various approaches to effectively develop and implement IEPs for neurodivergent students. For some educators, understanding the neurological capabilities and constraints of students with LDs and their educational impact is central to working effectively with students with IEP. The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the official diagnostic tool of the American Psychiatric Association, highlights the broader impact of learning disabilities, noting that they can result in “negative functional consequences across the lifespan, including high levels of psychological distress and poorer overall mental health. School dropout and co-occurring depressive symptoms increase the risk for poor mental health outcomes, including suicidality” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Researchers have also for decades approached this issue with the growing understanding that negative psychological and emotional factors can hinder students with LDs from demonstrating their full academic potential. Students with LDs are often perceived as different from their peers, both during academic activities and in social settings. As a result, their peers may engage with them less frequently during periods of school-based social activities, limiting opportunities for interaction and friendship-building (Mugnaini, Lasi, La Malfa, & Albertini, 2009; Pearl et al., 1998). These students are frequently pulled from their general classroom

settings to receive the academic support they need. The pull-out intervention, while beneficial for addressing academic challenges, predisposes students to classroom isolation, which negatively impacts their self-confidence and self-esteem (Zelege, 2004). This isolation often contributes to negative self-comparisons, as students with learning disabilities may measure their performance against their peers' academic achievements (Gadeyne, Ghesquière, & Onghena, 2004). Although many students compare their performance to that of their peers, students with LDs are particularly vulnerable to viewing themselves as inferior and different, resulting in feelings of frustration and anxiety, which impact overall school experience (Cavioni et al., 2017).

Research has explored the connection between social and emotional learning (SEL) and students with LDs. However, further research is needed to continue to deepen that understanding and emphasize the importance of incorporating SEL for these students. Cavioni et al. (2017) found that the education system could benefit from evaluating and developing universal SEL programs that address both academic and social needs for students with LDs. Studies on SEL programs and social-cognitive training provide evidence of their potential effectiveness for children and young people with LDs (Elias, 2004). As educators, we aim to prepare students for success both in school and in life, and SEL may be the key to addressing academic challenges (Hagarty & Morgan, 2020). Although studies discussing SEL for students with LDs highlights the importance of implementing such programs, it remains unclear what specific components these programs should include and which aspects of SEL intervention should be prioritized in practice as part of students' IEPs.

Methodology

This teacher action research uses multiple data points to explore a targeted incorporation of SEL support into students' IEPs and how such direct SEL interventions affect students' outlook towards schooling. The study's participants were 25 4th graders (ages 9-10 years) from an affluent elementary school in the Midwest of the United States. Of these 25 students, 16 were male and 9 were female. All 25 students belonged to the same classroom and participated in the data collection. The primary SEL interventions targeted two students, one female and one male, each with a documented learning disability. Adequate informed consent was obtained from each student's parents and/or guardians.

Data Collection

This research followed a phenomenological approach, with a series of self-reporting and observational data designed to suit the instructional context and age group. Before and after the targeted SEL support, I use a Google Form questionnaire to survey the social and emotional attitudes of the entire fourth grade students towards school. The questionnaire items were carefully structured in both language and content to ensure age appropriateness and conceptual clarity, drawing on established methodologies and phrasing from prior research to maintain consistency and enhance the validity of the instrument (Murano, et al., 2021). The questionnaires include both 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") and

multiple-choice items that ask for each student's opinions on their interest in what they are learning, how they view themselves as students and thinker, and whether they believe teachers understand their needs (Murano, et al., 2021). The language and structure of each question was adjusted to the students' level to make them more comprehensible and relatable.

After the pre-survey, a two-week observational period was conducted for the two students with IEPs in math and reading settings. During the qualitative observation period, notes focused on the student's social and emotional tendencies in the math and reading settings. After the two-week observational period, the two students with IEPs had an additional two-week period that included SEL intervention and observations. Following the observation phase, a targeted SEL intervention introduced student self-talk to positively alter their self-perception. The intervention occurred in the mornings for 5 to 10 minutes for two weeks. During that time, students practiced expressing their feelings and using self-talk sentences co-developed with the student teacher-researcher.

Students first explored what a self-talk sentence was and how they could use this during school. Examples of self-talk sentences included "I am capable of learning new things, and I can keep going when things are tough" and "I believe I can do it and will do my best, and I can train my brain." The two sentences were given individually at the beginning of the two weeks, where we discussed what the sentence was, when and how students could use it during school, and the overall importance of the self-talk sentences. Observations were also notated during this second two-week period in which the students used their self-talk sentences. The last data collected during this study was a post-survey identical to the pre-survey.

Findings

As noted above, this teacher action research project uses a series of data survey and observational data to more clearly understand the attitude of students in a fourth-grade classroom and how integrating SEL support in the IEPs of two students with LDs can shape their outlook on school. It should be noted that while the survey data offer some insights, the self-reporting structure and lack of corroborating evidence requires that we rely more heavily on observational data for the key findings. For the age group in question, it is unclear that questionnaires administered through the Google Form interface was the most suitable instrument for data collection, even if it was helpful for comparison. Additionally, since each data source illuminates specific aspects of the overarching research purpose, I organize findings along the self-reporting and observational sources.

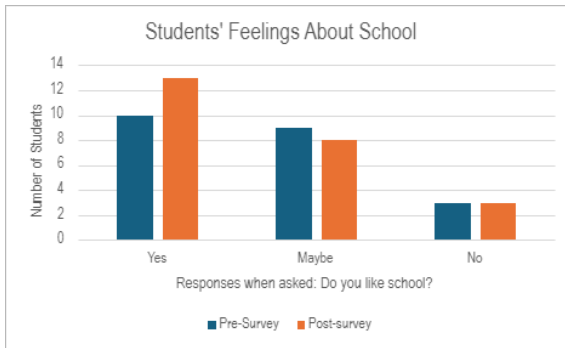
Survey Evidence of Student Attitudes so School

All 25 students completed the pre- and post-survey to understand the class's overall social and emotional attitudes towards school and to determine whether the two students with LDs were notably different from the rest of the students. As Figure 1 shows, most students had a positive attitude towards schooling, with 86.4 percent or 19 students total reporting a positive

attitude, including 47.4 percent (9 students) responding “Yes” and 52.6 percent (10 students) responding “Maybe” to whether they like school during the pre-survey.

Figure 1

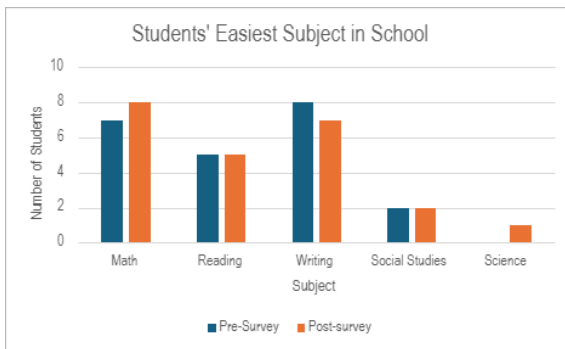
Pre-survey and post-survey attitudes of entire class towards school



This result is juxtaposed with responses to items about students' experiences with subject-level academic challenges, which is considered a possible mediator of students' attitude to school. Figure 2 shows that while writing (36.4 percent or 8 students) and math (31.8 percent or 7 students) emerge as the easiest subjects for most students, math also emerged among the most difficult subjects with 50 percent (11 students) reporting math as their most difficult subject in the pre-survey. Reading had comparatively fewer students (22.7 percent or 5 students) reporting it as their most difficult subject.

Figure 2

Pre-survey and post-survey attitudes about easiest school subject

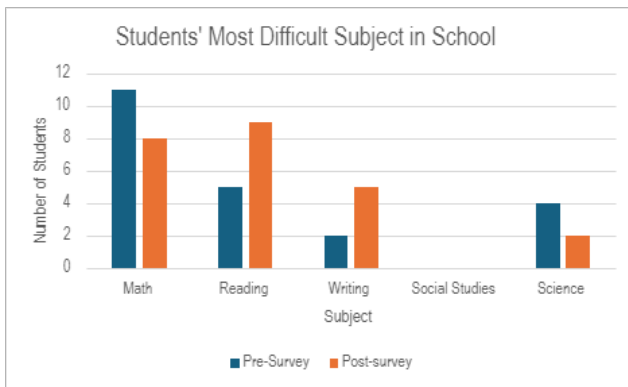


By the end of the SEL intervention, as discussed below, there had been some shifts in the overall class's attitudes to schooling. For instance, a total of 95.5 percent (21 students) now reported positive attitudes to school. Additionally, unlike the pre-survey, of these 21 students, more now responded "Yes" (61.9 percent or 13 students) to the question about liking school compared to those who responded "Maybe" (38.1 percent or 8 students). There was also a flip in the reported experiences of subject-based academic challenges in the post-survey, with math now viewed as the "easiest" (36.4 percent or 8 students) followed by writing (31.8 percent or 7 students) and reading remaining at the same 22.7 percent or 5 students as with the pre-survey (see Figure 3).

While these findings are interesting, absent any question of validity of the survey design with 9- and 10-year-olds, they are ancillary to the primary focus of this teacher action research project. The experiences of the two students with LDs are more important to the inquiry, and it is to these that the rest of these findings turn.

Figure 3

Pre-survey and post-survey attitudes about students' most difficult subject in school



Questionnaire responses from the two students with LDs (pseudonymized here as Marx and Julie for anonymity) reflects similar perceptions about school; Both Marx and Julie have an overall positive view of the school, which the students' attitudes are consistent with the entire class. Their responses show that they both enjoy learning and view school as necessary for future success. Both Julie and Marx reported that they enjoyed reading and viewed it as their strongest academic area, with an adventure-like taste for exploring historical (both past and future) events. Yet, Julie identified social studies as her least favorite subject, explaining that she could not catch up on the materials due to being removed from the class for academic support. Marx, however, identified writing as his least favorite subject because writing on paper is annoying and hard.

Both students reported math as the subject in which they experience the most challenge. While the two also agreed strongly with all the statements in the social-emotional survey, indicating an overall positive attitude towards school, it is important to note that they showed difficulty understanding what the questions were asking and how to answer them using the 5-point scale. As such, the students' responses should be understood with appropriate caveats, especially when not only the academic but also the social and emotional needs of the students are at stake.

Math Observations

During math, the students received push-in support from two special education resource teachers, who divided the hour of math into two thirty-minute sessions. During the first thirty minutes, the students participated in a whole group setting, where they were expected to complete the work alongside their peers with the help of the resource teacher. During the observation, Julie displayed a clear dislike for the subject, often shutting down when she encountered difficulty with the material. She struggled during math lessons and would frequently refuse to engage with the work for the lesson's duration. On several occasions, this led to emotional outbursts, including crying and expressions of anger and frustration. These consistent outbursts led to tension between the student and the math specialist. The student also displays shutdown and avoidance behaviors as a coping mechanism to manage the stress of confronting math problems that were significantly above her academic level. One such behavior includes positioning herself away from the resource teacher, making it challenging for the teacher to achieve proximity with the student and facilitate a productive lesson.

The student also refused a pretest for an upcoming unit, expressing frustration about not knowing the material. Even when the special education resource teachers differentiate the materials to meet her needs and work directly with her, she continued to exhibit negative emotions that cause her to shut down. During the second thirty minutes of math, Julie would relocate to a smaller table in the back of the classroom to work on problems tailored to their needs. She frequently becomes upset when asked to move to a different table, preferring to stay at her desk where her peers remain seated. This preference highlights her discomfort with being separated from her classmates, further impacting her engagement and emotions during math lessons.

In contrast, Marx behaved in a more reserved manner and often disengaged during math lessons. Unlike other subjects, he does not enjoy participating in math. When assigned math homework, he seems to often forget to bring it home to avoid doing additional math problems. He explained that completing homework at home is difficult because he lacks the math resources available at school. Additionally, when he struggles with the homework, his grandmother tries to help him, which frustrates him and often leads to an outburst. He shared that he dislikes when his grandmother attempts to assist him because he prefers to keep his school and home-lives separate as evident from his statement that, "My grandma is my grandma, not my teacher." In the whole-group setting, he struggles to keep up with the class pace, often missing instruction or skipping steps in solving problems. When confused during a math lesson, he typically does not

ask for help. When he indicates that he is confused or lost during a lesson, the resource teacher usually assists him. However, at times, the teacher is unaware of his need as they are focused on assisting Julie. This disconnects between the expectations for student self-advocacy and teacher support often results in a lack of immediate support that further complicates his ability to engage and succeed in math lessons.

During group work opportunities, Marx and Julie are always paired together based on their similar academic levels. Both students exhibit noticeable changes in demeanor during math, often attempting to avoid engagement in various ways. At times, they are reluctant to work with the resource teacher. They are consistently seated at the back table, separated from the rest of the class. The separation occurs even outside instruction time, when the students can socialize. They display hesitation when attempting to engage with their peers, which often leads to feelings of frustration.

Reading Observations

For reading, the students follow an alternate curriculum and spend the entire afternoon outside the general classroom working with the resource teacher on reading fluency. Both students exhibit a noticeably more positive attitude during this time, as the smaller group comprises peers at the same academic level. In this setting, they appear more comfortable and express their true personalities while engaging with others of similar skill levels. The classroom is structured to promote their success and understanding of the material, which appears to positively influence their behavior and peer interactions. During reading time, they are given ample opportunities to participate successfully, boosting their confidence in the material and affirming why reading is their favorite subject. During individualized reading times in the general classroom, both students exhibit excitement and enthusiasm, demonstrating confidence in their reading abilities. Despite this, they continue to hesitate to work in social settings, struggling to keep pace with their peers. When reading in the classroom, they consistently put forth effort, showing their willingness to engage with the material. Although they put forth effort and engage with the reading material, they often display hesitation when working with others. Despite their overall positive attitude toward reading, peer pressure in the general classroom can cause them to withdraw or shut down, impacting their overall engagement. Intervention: Self-Talk Sentence

The intervention sessions took place in the mornings outside the classroom, either in the hallway or in other available rooms, depending on the day and room availability. The students were eager and excited about this one-on-one opportunity to address their emotional needs – an aspect not typically acknowledged in their daily routine by instigating shifts their self-perceptions through regular recurrent practices positive self-talk, the SEL intervention sought to create a safe mechanism through which the students felt comfortable expressing their emotions. During the two Mondays of the intervention, the students were introduced to positive self-talk statements. These sessions involved discussing the meaning behind each statement, answering students' questions, and identifying moments during the school day when the statements could be applied. The first self-talk statement, "I am capable of learning new things, and I can keep going when

things are tough” was introduced in the first week. At the start of the second week, we introduced a new self-talk sentence: “I believe I can do it, and I will do my best. I can train my brain.” The students practiced saying the sentences aloud several times and wrote them down on sticky notes, which they kept in a visible location throughout the week as a form of reinforcement.

Increased positive emotions and behaviors were observed during the intervention period, particularly during math instruction. Julie demonstrated increased excitement at the beginning of the math block, and her positive demeanor appeared to help her manage frustration when encountering challenging problems. She kept her sticky note in her math notebook, which she used daily, and was often observed smiling when she retrieved it. No negative outbursts or refusals to work were observed during this time. While this marked a positive shift in her overall behavior and emotions, she continued to experience some frustration and occasional feelings of isolation. Although the level of difficulty in the math work continued to cause some frustration, she showed a greater willingness to persist and work through the problems.

Similarly, Marx demonstrated fewer instances of avoiding math homework or in-class problems after the intervention was introduced. He showed a more positive attitude toward completing his homework, ensuring it was ready at the end of the day and notifying me when he had completed it. Despite ongoing frustration with the challenging math material, he was more open to seeking help and advocating for his needs such as asking to slow the pace of instruction or note taking. This positive shift in his approach to math appeared to influence his overall demeanor, as he became more open and comfortable expressing his personality in the general classroom.

Regarding reading, there was less noticeable change in the students' dispositions toward the subject, as they already exhibited stronger social and emotional expression in this environment. The reading setting was tailored to their academic level, allowing them to succeed and demonstrate their understanding among peers. Their demeanor noticeably shifted to a more positive tone when they entered the reading classroom. Initially, I was uncertain why their social and emotional learning appeared more developed during reading. However, in the final week of observation, it became clear why reading was their favorite subject.

The reading specialist working with the students has created an environment that fosters success and understanding, using their challenges and differences as motivation to defy expectations. On a particularly difficult day, when the students expressed feelings of inadequacy by saying they were “not smart,” the reading specialist paused the lesson to show them a list of famous and highly intelligent individuals who also had learning disabilities. This gesture reinforced the message that their learning disabilities do not define their intelligence or potential. The reading specialist consistently ensures that the students recognize their self-worth and ability to express their emotions in healthy, constructive ways.

The social and emotional intervention had a positive impact on their behaviors in both math and reading, fostering greater confidence. During the intervention, their personalities became more visible as they grew more comfortable and less isolated within the classroom environment.

Conclusion and Future Research

From the observation phase throughout the intervention period, clear growth emerged in both students' social and emotional learning, particularly within the math setting. Conversations with the reading specialist revealed that she has incorporated an SEL-focused approach when working with students with reading disabilities. She emphasized the positive impacts of using an alternate curriculum in a small group setting, where students feel more supported and successful.

The students' enthusiasm during the intervention highlighted the potential benefits that SEL can offer to students with learning disabilities on their IEPs. Even small behavioral and emotional shifts demonstrated the significant influence SEL can have on students with IEPs. Spending additional time in the smaller setting also allowed me to build stronger relationships with the students, which, in turn, contributed to their increased confidence in the classroom.

The students also expressed a strong connection with the reading specialist, who prioritizes their social and emotional needs and fosters relationships with their parents through consistent, meaningful communication. By integrating SEL strategies into her instruction, the reading specialist has positively transformed the students' attitudes on reading. These results underscore the importance of incorporating SEL knowledge and practices when supporting students with LDs and IEPs.

The findings from this study suggest that SEL strategies could address aspects of learning that are currently missing, thereby enhancing the academic capabilities of students with IEPs. Future studies could benefit from implementing a well-established SEL program across all aspects of the school day, starting at the beginning of the school year. This would provide a longer observation period, making it possible to determine if there is a positive link between SEL and academic success for students with LDs. Teaching students the skills necessary for social and emotional learning could support future research, providing evidence for the inclusion of SEL in individualized learning plans.

The insights generated from this inquiry, when read in the broader context of research linking learning disabilities with SEL, provides potential inspiration for teacher professional development that target improving teacher effectiveness in supporting students with IEPs and 504 plans. Additionally, this work suggests that considering policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels to integrate student SEL support into IDEA-recognized needs would move educators and their students further towards equitable education and improved outcomes.

References

- Adibsereshki, N., Shaydaei, M., & Movallali, G. (2016). The effectiveness of emotional intelligence training on the adaptive behaviors of students with intellectual disability. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 62(4), 245–252. <https://doi.org/10.1179/2047387715Y.0000000014>
- Alsalamah, A. A. (2023). Special Education Teachers' Self-Efficacy in Implementing Social-Emotional Learning to Support Students with Learning Disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 38(3), 209-223. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12318>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic And Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders*. Fifth Edition. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School*. National Academy Press, 79–113. <https://doi.org/10.17226/9853>
- Cavioni, V., Grazzani, I., & Ornaghi, V. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning for Children with Learning Disability: Implications for Inclusion. *International Journal of Emotional Education*, 9(2), 100–109.
- Elias, M. J. (2004). The Connection between Social-Emotional Learning and Learning Disabilities: Implications for Intervention. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 27(1), 53–W.
- Gadeyne, E., Ghesquière, P., & Onghena, P. (2004). Psychosocial functioning of young children with learning problems. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 45(3), 510-521.
- Hagarty, I., & Morgan, G. (2020). Social-Emotional Learning for Children with Learning Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 36(2), 208–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1742096>
- Mugnaini, D., Lassi, S., La Malfa, G., & Albertini, G. (2009). Internalizing correlates of dyslexia. *World Journal of Pediatrics*, 5(4), 255-264.
- Murano, Dana, et al. “Measuring social and emotional skills in elementary students: Development of self-report likert, situational judgment test, and forced choice items.” *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 169, Feb. 2021, p. 110012, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110012>.